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Rethinking Inspirations for Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*: A New Look at the Case of the Silesian Gravediggers' Scandal of 1606

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Abstract
The article is an attempt to re-examine two theories concerning the possible inspirations for Mary Shelley's masterpiece *Frankenstein*. The paper first evokes the most popular theory conceived by Radu Florescu whose endeavour to investigate the case of *Frankestein's* sources has been widely acclaimed. It is then juxtaposed with another theory which still has not been profoundly examined and yet seems worth analysing. It refers to the idea publicised by a Polish researcher in the 80s and 90s who implied that the title and the content of Shelley's novel could have been inspired by the events which took place in today's Polish town of Ząbkowice Śląskie. The present paper scrutinizes and discusses the story of the Silesian gravediggers' scandal which broke out in 1606 as a potential impulse which might have triggered the writing of *Frankenstein*.

Key words
Mary Shelley; Frankenstein; Ząbkowice Śląskie; gravediggers' scandal; Radu Florescu; Jerzy Organiściak

Introduction

There have been numerous attempts to find and define the sources of Mary Shelley's inspirations to write her timeless novel about a Geneva scientist endeavouring to create a human being. These are both attempts to find the etymological and lexical origin of the name of Dr. Frankenstein, and the title of the novel, and to trace down a story or stories which would resemble the one presented by Shelley and eventually be labelled as a potential inspiration of the young writer to produce her horror novel. The first part of the present paper refers to the commonly known theory conceived by a Romanian scholar Radu Florescu who leads the name of Frankenstein back to Castle Frankenstein, birthplace of the alchemist Johann Konrad Dippel, near Darmstadt, which the Shelleys might have visited on their journey down the Rhine in 1814. The rival theory discussed in

the article was formulated in Poland in the late 1980s by a local researcher Jerzy Organiściak, and its major idea was to link the historical accounts on the gravediggers' scandal that broke out at the beginning of the 17th century in a town of Frankenstein in Lower Silesia (today Ząbkowice Śląskie in Poland) with Mary Shelley's masterpiece. Apart from the story of gravediggers who committed appalling crimes by preparing a poisonous powder from human remains, the researcher pays attention to the image of the "hellish hunter," a metaphor used by Samuel Heimnitz in his sermons referring to the plague in Frankenstein. It was later described as a "monster in a human body", which could also be an inspiration for Mary Shelley to create her own Monster. As Organiściak argues in his paper, it is possible that Mary Shelley had some knowledge of the horrid story of the gravediggers and Heimnitz's sermons. The major purpose of the present paper is to scrutinize both theories as equally relevant and applicable to the question of who or what inspired the writing of *Frankenstein*. This article aims to introduce Organiściak's theory (published only in Polish) to English studies and Shelley scholarship by re-examining its assumptions and by juxtaposing it with Florescu's challenge as well as placing it against the content of the literary production itself.

Radu Florescu's search for Frankenstein

Undoubtedly, the most widely popularized and generally accepted theory depicting Mary Shelley's literary inspiration was developed by a Romanian scholar Radu Florescu in his 1975 bestseller *In Search of Frankenstein*. Following the great success of his previous research (*In Search of Dracula*, 1972), which forever perpetuated the historical figure of Vlad III (more known as Vlad the Impaler) as the archetype of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and considerably contributed to the boom in tourism in Transylvania in central Romania, Florescu undertook another enterprise, this time to scrutinize all possible inspirations for Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. In the preface to his dissertation, the author admits that his attempt "originates in dissatisfaction with Mary Shelley's scholarship concerning the origins of the name of her novel" (1975: ix). He also notices the omnipresent confusion as to the name of Frankenstein which, in mass understanding, is associated with the originally nameless monster and not with its creator, but the confusion also extends to the origin of the name itself, as it had not been sufficiently researched before Florescu initiated his inquiry. He claims that Shelley's biographers and critics of the novel "should have attempted a satisfactory explanation of the origin of the name Frankenstein, for it was not just a quaint polysyllabic German name stemming from Mary's imagination" (1975: 14). If the name was not a result of the author's pure imagination based on a familiarly sounding German word with a popular suffix –stein (meaning "stone"), then where did it stem from?

According to Radu Florescu, the source of inspiration for the book's title should be looked for in the journey down the Rhine river, which the author of *Frankenstein* took with her companions in 1814. Mary, her stepsister Claire Clairmont and P.B. Shelley in the company of three German students were travelling by water from Switzerland to the mouth of the Rhine in Holland, with the intent

to return to England. What drew Florescu's attention was the part of the journey between Mannheim and Mainz, as this is where the Castle Frankenstein is located at a site near the river. Florescu (1975: 56) notices that "that the Rhine Valley made a profound impact on the travellers is evident not only from the journals, but also from the novel *Frankenstein*". Indeed, Mary must have been impressed by the scenery of the valley as she noted its beauty in her *Journal* and later she immortalized the landscape in *Frankenstein* when Victor is travelling down the same river with his friend Clerval, admiring its charm:

> This part of the Rhine, indeed, presents a singularly variegated landscape. In one spot you view rugged hills, ruined castles overlooking tremendous precipices, with the dark Rhine rushing beneath; and, on the sudden turn of a promontory, flourishing vineyards, with green sloping banks, and a meandering river, and populous towns, occupy the scene. (M. Shelley 1999 [1818]: 119)

Even though references to castles from the area appear both in Mary's *Journal* and in the novel, neither of them mentions the Castle Frankenstein specifically. Florescu, however, explains that since we know that the party paid a visit to Darmstadt, and that "a visit to the neighbouring hills where Castle Frankenstein is located is one of the most popular excursions out of the city; hardly to be missed by the visitor" (1975: 63), the three adventurous young people, "given their motivation and proximity [...] could have visited Castle Frankenstein on the night of September 2nd, 1814" (1975: 60).

Having accepted their visit to the castle as highly probable, the second question arises: why did this particular historical spot inspire Mary Shelley to write her horror masterpiece? Florescu goes on to explain that during the journey, the three accompanying German students may have related the story of Johann Konrad Dippel, the alchemist who "thought he had discovered 'the principle of life'" (1975: 60) and who was, most importantly, born at Castle Frankenstein. Dippel (1673-1734), who once signed his doctoral dissertation "Franckensteina" to highlight his original birthplace, was not only an alchemist, but also a theologian, a physician and an occultist and was known for founding a laboratory where he performed unusual experiments. On such grounds, the parallels between the castle and the eccentric scientist and Mary Shelley's inspiration for the novel seem to be obvious enough to claim the credibility of Florescu's finding. The researcher concludes: "Whether the model for the scientist Victor Frankenstein was provided by Shelley, or by Konrad Dippel – or a combination of both – assuredly the name "Frankenstein", and the theme of the scientist seeking to find 'the principle of life' were germinating in Mary's mind from the time of her visit to the Rhine in 1814, even though she developed the plot in Geneva two years later" (1975: 62).

Silesian gravediggers' scandal of 1606

It was in Poland in 1991 where a new captivating theory appeared attempting to discover the inspiration for Mary Shelley's horror story. It did not, however, relate to or expand Florescu's research, but instead offered an independent idea which moved the location of the novel's source of inspiration from Dippel's castle to a Polish town of Ząbkowice Śląskie in Lower Silesia. It was there where a local researcher Jerzy Organiściak was examining the historical name of the town which was known as Frankenstein before 1945. Historians explain that the town "was captured by the Red Army on May 8 1945 and in the same month passed over to Polish administration. The name Ząbkowice Śląskie (although used in a similar form in Polish literature since the second half of the 19th century, most probably due to a misunderstanding) was officially given to the city in March 1946" (Eysymontt et.al 2016: 29).

Interested in the town's past and present, Organiściak resolved to scrutinize whether there are any potential connections and convergent points between the Silesian town of Frankenstein and the title of Mary Shelley's world-famous novel. He published an article titled "Zagadka Frankensteina" ("The Mystery of Frankenstein") in a regional journal *Karkonosz* (1991, Vol. 5), where he claims that what might have been the potential link between the town of Frankenstein and the novel is the event which haunted the town in 1606. The author refers to the plague which broke out in the city on January 17, 1606 and quickly spread over the town and its suburbs. As Organiściak (1991: 207) notices, "there wouldn't be anything unusual in the event as plagues often broke out these days except for its scale"[1]. The death toll seemed indeed outstanding as it totalled, according to different sources[2], from 1900 to 2066 people, which constituted approximately one-fourth of the town's population. This raised suspicions that someone might have stood behind the great loss of lives and it consequently led to initiating a series of accusations and arrests. The chief suspicion was cast upon those for whom the ubiquitous death must have been a profitable business – group of local gravediggers. Martin Koblitz in the town's chronicle *Annales Francostenensis* reported:

> On 10th September 1606 two local gravediggers were arrested – Wacław Forster and Jerzy Freidiger – both accused of mixing and producing poisons. [...] On 14th September two other men were arrested – a former prisoner Weiber and the third gravedigger Kacper Schleiniger and on 16th an 87-year-old beggar Kacper Shetts was caught and imprisoned. All of them were charged with poisoning and spreading the epidemic. [...] On 4th October Zuzanna Mass – the daughter of a city clerk Schubert, her mother Magdalena and Małgorzata Schetts – the wife of the beggar – were all brought to prison. (Koblitz, qtd. in Organiściak 1991: 208)

After the arrests, an investigation board consisting of a few local and non-resident doctors led by Jan Schweps was established. In the beginning, the doctors treated the case as an ungrounded prejudice and superstition, but they changed their minds after Forster's house had been searched for. What was found during the search was

a great number of boxes containing poison made of human corpses. The horrid story quickly spread in Europe and a publisher and a printer Georg Kress described the case in *Newe Zeyttung* newspaper published in Augsburg the same year:

> In the city of Frankenstein in Silesia, eight gravediggers were arrested. After being tortured they all admitted to have made poisonous powder which they scattered a few times in houses and spread on thresholds and doorknobs as a result of which many people got intoxicated and died. Besides, they stole a lot of money from the houses and striped the bodies taking their mantles. They also ripped pregnant women, took their foetuses out and they ate the hearts of the inborn babies. (Kress 1606)

The trial took place on September 20, 1606 and it found all eight people guilty. The convicts were sentenced to death by mutilation and burning alive. The *Newe Zeyttung* continued to report on the event:

> First they were all showed around the city. Then they were ripped with red-hot pinchers and their thumbs were torn off. The older gravedigger and his 87-year old assistant had their right hands cut off. Then they both were chained to a post and roasted. The new gravedigger from Strzegom had his penis torn off with red-hot pinchers. Then he and the others were chained to a post, boiled and roasted. (Kress 1606)

On October 5 there was another trial of the accomplices indicated by the main convicts at tortures. They were all sentenced to death penalty and the last execution took place on February 13, 1607. In total 17 people were lost in connection to the scandal. Between 4th and 10th October, 1606, pastor Samuel Heinitz gave six thanksgiving sermons which were published two years later in Leipzig. On February 18, 1607, there was a celebratory thanksgiving mass after the plague had ended. Year after the events, on March 15, 1608, pastor Heinitz consecrated St. Nicholas's Chapel profaned by the gravediggers.

According to the promoter of the theory, Mary Shelley might have been acquainted with the story of the executed gravediggers from the town of Frankenstein, and it could have inspired her to write her acclaimed novel. Indeed, the scandal reverberated widely in Europe and, as mentioned above, was reported in *Newe Zeyttung* together with four wooden engravings and Heinitz's sermons were published in Lepzig, which suggests a considerable interest in the event at that time. The question arises of how could possibly Mary Shelley come across the story more than two hundred years later. Organiściak (1991: 213) implies that "the right track is offered by the author herself, who in the introduction to *Frankenstein* explains that the inspiration for writing the novel comes from a dream" in which she saw "the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half-vital motion" (M. Shelley 1999 [1818]: 4). The dream was a consequence of a late-night talk about monsters, vampires, apparitions and other supernatural phenomena which she enjoyed in a company of her husband P.B. Shelley, Lord

Byron and Dr John Polidori during their stay in Villa Diodati near Lake Geneva in 1816 when the famous ghost story writing competitions was proposed:

> I passed the summer of 1816 in the environs of Geneva. The season was cold and rainy, and in the evenings we crowded around a blazing wood fire, and occasionally amused ourselves with some German stories of ghosts, which happened to fall into our hands. These tales excited in us a playful desire of imitation. Two other friends (a tale from the pen of one of whom would be far more acceptable to the public than any thing I can ever hope to produce) and myself agreed to write each a story founded on some supernatural occurrence. (P.B. Shelley 1999 [1817]: 10)

Organiściak claims that it was John Polidori who "provided the company with relevant readings" to provoke the competitors' imagination and these "relevant readings" might have included the story of the gravediggers' scandal. The researcher underlines that Polidori's interests concentrated around vampires[3], supernatural phenomena and poisons and that he committed suicide in 1821 by using a self-made poison (qtd. in Organiściak 1991: 214). This makes us speculate that Polidori, in pursuit of his interest, could have come across the story from the Silesian town of Frankenstein much more easily than young Mary, for example in an old issue of the *Newe Zeyttung*. Organiściak (1991: 214) concludes: "it might be assumed that during their talks, among other subjects, this story was also raised, which truly moved the author of *Frankenstein*, who did not, however, remember the details of it. Only a 'sediment' was left – the name of Frankenstein and the idea of using parts of corpses".

There is yet one more element pointed out by Organiściak in his research, which might be perceived as the most convincing argument in the deliberations around his theory. The author pays attention to the title of the sermons given by pastor Heinitz and published in Leipzig, whose first part (the full title is much longer, which was a usual trend those days) is

Historia laquei venatorio. Warhafftige Geschicht von etlichen geoffenbarten unnd zerstörten Gifftwercken dess hellischen Jägers in der Pest ... 1606 zu Franckenstein in Schlesien. Organiściak (1991: 212) claims that the phrase "hellishen Jägers", which directly translates as a "hellish hunter", was used by Heinitz as an image of a bad spirit which possesses people's minds and urges them to evil deeds. This "hellish hunter", which was initially intended as a philosophical metaphor and embodiment of evil, later evolved to be treated as a physically existing creature, which was, in fact, created by chroniclers and historians who, being inspired by the town's historical name, nicknamed the imaginary monster Frankenstein. Władysław Grabski (1960: 570), a Polish historian, clearly confirms it: "In 1606 in Ząbkowice, there lived a monster in human body, who, by his atrocious actions, put to death 2000 people, as chroniclers report, and frolicked wickedly until the hand of divine justice fell upon him". This legendary monster in a human body which evolved from the real plague in the city of Frankenstein in 1606, undoubtedly made the Silesian town famous and, according to Organiściak, might have inspired Mary Shelley to write her novel.

The Polish theory and the content of the novel

Even though Organiściak admits in a private correspondence[4] in 2021 that his theory conceived twenty years before was only an interesting challenge to search for the potential links between the novel and the gravediggers' scandal from Ząbkowice, and he acknowledges that Shelley, most probably, drew her inspirations from her visit to the Frankestein Castle in 1814, the Polish theory cannot and should not be ultimately rejected, degraded and forgotten. It does, however, require a new look and fresh insight as a great majority of publications concerning the gravediggers' story are confined to resurfacing the historical events of 1606 and retelling Organiściak's implications. Although Radu Florescu's research and findings are widely known and often recalled by scholars, the present publications (mostly newspaper or internet essays and reports) touching upon the gravediggers' scandal theory rarely refer to the primary search of *Frankenstein's* inspirations initiated by Florescu. What is more, hardly any of them makes an attempt to place the research within the literary analysis of the novel's text itself.

The first element from the Polish theory which should be verified through the prism of the novel itself is the "relevant reading" that Shelley and her company were provided when they came up with the idea of a horror story writing competition. Organiściak suggests that the books and stories which they read to find inspiration might have included the story from the Silesian town of Frankenstein, for instance the report of *Newe Zeyttung*. First and foremost, there seems to be little probability that a group of people staying in a holiday villa at the lake in Geneva in 1816 would by any chance come across a copy of a German newspaper published more than two hundred years before. Secondly, even if it was Polidori who was then in possession of the old newspaper and he handed it to Mary and the company, then why would they not mention this source of inspiration somewhere, for example in the introduction to *Frankenstein*. In fact, in the preface to the 1817 edition of the novel, Percy Bysshe Shelley (1999 [1817]: 10) clearly stated that they amused themselves "with some German stories of ghosts, which happened to fall into our hands". In the author's introduction to the 1831 edition of the novel, Shelley confirms her husband's words expressed fourteen years earlier:

> But it proved a wet, ungenial summer, and incessant rain often confined us for days to the house. Some volumes of ghost stories translated from the German into French, fell into our hands. There was the history of the incessant lover, who, when he thought to clasp the bride to whom he had pledged his vows, found himself in the arms of the pale ghost of her whom he had deseted. There was the tale of the sinful founder of his race, whose miserable doom it was to bestow the kiss of death on all the younger sons of his fated house, just when they reached the age of promise. (M. Shelley 1999 [1818]: 2)

Obviously, the "volumes of ghost stories" must have included more stories than just the two described by Shelley in the introduction. Nevertheless, the story of the gravediggers' scandal definitely does not fit in the category of ghost stories

and it is certainly not "founded on some supernatural occurrence". Moreover, the only two places where it was reported on was the *Newe Zeyttung* and the sermons from Leipzig. It could not have been included in the volume, as it is widely known what these "volumes" actually contained. Basing on the author's Journals, *A Mary Shelley Encyclopedia* reports: "In the 1831 edition's introduction, Shelley describes how tale "Les Portraits de Famille" in translator J.B.B. Eyriès's ghost story collection *Fantasmagoriana* (1812) influenced her and how the collection inspired Byron to suggest that he, Shelley, Polidori, and PBS each write a ghost story" (Morrison and Stone 2003: 157). Since the exact title of the collection was clearly given in Shelley's *Journal*, biographers accept this particular book to be the actual "volumes of ghost stories". *Fantasmagoriana* is a French anthology consisting of German ghost stories which were translated and published in 1812 by Jean-Baptiste Benoit Eyriès. They are a selection of eight stories[5] from the first two volumes of Johann August Apel and Friedrich Laun's *Gespensterbuch* (1811), with additional stories by Johann Karl August Musäus and Heinrich Clauren. Its subtitle may be translated to English as *Collection of stories of apparitions, spectres, revenants, phantoms, etc.* (*Recueil d'histoires, d'apparitions, de spectres, revenans, fantômes, etc.*). It is conspicuous in the introduction that the book's "contents probed to her quick" (Sunstein 1989: 121), and that *Fantasmagoriana* was the primary source which precipitated not only the story-writing competition in Geneva but also initiated the making of *Frankenstein*. For some reason, Organiściak in his theory does not mention the French anthology when he writes about the "relevant readings" which the group was provided with by Polidori. It must be, however, strongly emphasized that it has been commonly known since the publication of the novel, that the "German ghost stories" which appear both in the author's introduction and P.B. Shelley's preface was, in fact, *Fantasmagoriana*, which certainly did not include the story of the gravediggers' scandal from the Silesian town of Frankenstein in 1606. Basically, it seems highly improbable that Mary Shelley read the *Newe Zeyttung* newspaper or the Leipzig sermons published two hundred years before and was interested in the macabre accounts without even noting it in her Journals or the novel's introduction.

The fact that Shelley did not read the story of the gravediggers among other "German ghost stories" does not mean, however, that she cannot have heard or learned about it from a different source. As it was mentioned earlier, Organiściak claims she might have heard it from Polidori who was pursuing general knowledge about poisons, vampires and supernatural elements and he might have been aware of the Silesian unnatural epidemic. It is also possible that she heard about the famous story from the little Silesian town of Frankenstein, and the only element which remained in her memory was the town's name itself. Hence, it might have been the combination of two geographical places – the Silesian and Dippel's Frankenstein which, associated together through their history, inspired the title and probably also the content of Shelley's novel.

It has been proved in Florescu's theory that the content of the novel partially reflects the inspirations drawn from Frankenstein Castle and its inhabitant Dippel who was an alchemist fascinated with the "principle of life". If Florescu in his research relied partially on the literary content of the novel, then it might

be justifiable and feasible to draw similar parallels between the plot of the novel and Organiściak's theory based on the gravediggers' scandal. The major plot of *Frankenstein* is largely founded on the idea of defying the laws of nature. In the novel, it is the godly power of creation which has been seized by a scientist obsessed with the idea of possessing the ability to give life. By claiming the right to create a living creature, Victor violated the natural, godly and generally acknowledged order of the world. Again, in the introduction, Mary Shelley admitted, that she listened to a conversation between Lord Byron and P.B. Shelley about the "nature of the principle of life" during which they disputed over Dr. Darwin's experiments who "preserved a piece of vermicelli in a glass case, till by some extraordinary means it began to move with voluntary motion" and hence she came to a conclusion that "perhaps a corpse would be re-animated; galvanism had given token to such things: perhaps the component parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and endued with vital warmth" (Shelley 1999 [1818]: 4). Indeed, as Siv Jannson confirms, the young author was clearly fascinated with yet ungrounded science, which must have influenced the book which, according to Jannson (1999: xvii) is "the product of an overactive imagination fuelled by German ghost stories and far-fetched scientific ideas". Even though the idea of reanimating life did not find its evidence in real life science, Shelley took advantage of the "far-fetched idea" in her novel to discourse on the process of creation although she realizes the consequences that the violation of the laws of nature might entail: "Frightful must it be; for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the creator of the world" (1999 [1818]: 4). By meddling with the indivisible law of nature and godly privilege of creating life, Victor should have taken full responsibility for the consequences which such violation might precipitate. Instead, he acted unreasonably to pursue the scientific desire to go beyond the limits of life and death and neglected the lethal threat that his experiment posed to the people around him. In consequence, the death toll resulting from his recklessness and obsession included his brother William, Justine who "perished on the scaffold" for being falsely accused and sentenced, his best friend Henry Clerval and his beloved Elizabeth. In this sense, the novel can be read as a warning against the ungrounded scientific experiments which defy the laws of nature and frolic with people's life.

Looking at Shelley's novel and Organiściak's theory from the above perspective, it would be feasible to find some parallels between them, although not very immediate or clear-cut ones. What actually happened in the town of Frankenstein in 1606 was, in fact, an act of violating and defying the laws of nature and godly rights, and these rights embrace not only the process of giving life, but also taking it. Hence, the principle of life and death lies in the centre of both the novel and the story of the gravediggers' scandal. The latter offers a reversed idea of what is discoursed by Shelley in her novel: to manage the creation of life vs. to manage the destruction of life, to possess godly powers vs. to possess devil's powers. Such understanding of the gravediggers' scandal story as a potential inspiration for the title and/or the content of the novel is reinforced when the "hellish hunter", which Organiściak used to support his theory, is recalled. The "hellish hunter" in

people's imaginative minds evolved to signify the embodiment of evil spurred by gravediggers experimenting with poison. By orchestrating the diabolical plan to spread the plague and consequently kill two thousand people, the gravediggers from the town of Frankenstein created a legend of "a monster in a human body" whose "atrocious actions" only ended when "justice fell upon him". The monster, both in case of the scandal of 1606 and Shelley's novel, is indeed a symbol of a hidden evil nature of mankind, which is highlighted by the author:

> Before I looked upon the accounts of vice and injustice, that I read in books or heard from others, as tales of ancient days, or imaginary evils; at least they were remote, and more familiar to reason than to the imagination; but now misery has come home, and men appear as monsters thirsting for each other's blood. (Shelley 1999 [1818]: 72)

The above fragment might be read as a free-floating analogy to the gravediggers who, for the monstrosities they had performed to the local people, deserved to be perceived as "monsters thirsting for each other's blood". Most importantly, however, Shelley's monster and the "hellish hunter" also stand for the deadly danger which defying the laws of nature entails.

Conclusion

Both theories regarding the inspirations of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* must be treated as independent on each other. Florescu did not mention anything about the Polish town of Ząbkowice Śląskie in his research either because he had published his book about fifteen years before the story of gravediggers was popularized by Organiściak or he did not consider it as significant. Organiściak, on the other hand, did not rely his findings on Florescu's discovery, although he admitted in a correspondence that he acknowledged *Frankenstein* being based on the figure of alchemist Dippel as more probable and grounded.

The aim of the present paper was to prove that neither theory can be fully and explicitly accepted as true or rejected as false. Both are probable and they do not exclude one another. It is justifiable to state that what inspired Shelley to write her novel and give it the title it is famous for might have been a combination and conglomerate of stories, ideas, traces and experiences. It is highly probable, although not absolutely certain, that Mary Shelley visited the Frankenstein Castle and there she may have conceived the base idea for her story. It is also highly probable that she heard about Konrad Dippel whom she might have used as a progenitor of her main protagonist Dr Victor Frankenstein. There is very little probability that Shelley read about the gravediggers' scandal in the *Newe Zeyttung* and there is absolutely no probability that the story was included in the German ghost stories which she was given to read. It is, however, possible that Polidori, who was interested in experiments with poisons and vampires knew something about the town of Frankenstein and could have passed his knowledge to Mary Shelley while they were staying together in Geneva.

Looking at the plot of the novel, it is hard not to notice a slightly tenuous and yet very significant element which refers to what happened in the town of Frankenstein in 1606, and which has not been raised by other researchers. It is the reversed idea of creating and destroying life which lies in the centre of both stories, and the concept of a monster (or a "hellish hunter") evolving to become the personification of the evil side of human nature which surfaces when the laws of nature are violated allows us to think that even if Mary Shelley did not read about the plague and its results, she at least might have heard about it and used it as inspiration. This general cognisance of 17th century gravediggers meddling with human life combined with the experience which she drew from her visit to Dippel's castle consequently led to the writing of one of the best-known horror stories of all time.

Notes

1 All Polish quotations have been translated by the author of the article unless otherwise stated.

2 According to Organiściak, sources vary as to the actual number of the deceased. The data given by J.A. Kopietz, based on a report by Johannes Matthäus Breßler, say that 2061 people died including 1503 adults and 558 children. According to dr Schweps, the number amounted to 2066, and the town's chronicler Martin Koblitz reports 1900 people dying as a result of the plague in his chronicle *Annales Francostenensis*.

3 He even published a short story "The Vampyre" in 1819 which is thought to be the first published modern vampire story.

4 The author of the present paper corresponded with Jerzy Organiściak in March, 2021.

5 The English titles of the eight stories are: "Dumb Love", "Family Portraits", "The Death's Head", "The Death Bride", "The Fated Hour", "The Revenant", "The Great Chamber", "The Black Chamber.

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